

A rocky road ahead

AZMI HAQ

The complex Pakistani political chessboard looks seriously 'overcrowded'. The Islamic world's sole nuclear power is presently the arena for the modern day equivalent of the famous 'great game'. On what now forms Pakistan's North West Frontier, Afghanistan and the Central Asian Plateau, was once a theatre for a protracted, painful and zero sum power struggle between Imperial India, Tsarist Russia and local tribal influences. Hundred years on, global powers and local players have assembled on the same plateau, yet again, vying for strategic advantage.

As Sunnis and Shias conduct a proxy war to dictate the religious paradigm, the Taliban fight pro-western military forces to establish theocracies in the region. Yet on another level, forces of democracy led by secular and religious parties challenge the General's rule, while the big boys, America, China and India hatch plans to implement their own regional agendas in and around this geo-political powder keg.

As in all dynamic power equations, one's gain is another's loss. One gainer on this layered political map of Pakistan seems to be its former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. No stranger to karmic ebb and flow, the twice-elected former leader of Pakistan People's Party (PPP), who also holds the distinction of being the Islamic world's first ever-female prime minister, is witnessing a sharp rise in her political currency. Survivor of two military / judicial coups, Benazir has been exiled intermittently, both by military rulers and unfavourable political regimes, for over 15 years. At 54, Pakistan's resilient Ms Bhutto continues to ride a roller coaster of agony and ecstasy, unfazed by her family's tragic political saga. Her father Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto while soon thereafter, her brother, Shahnawaz Bhutto, died under

mysterious circumstances in France. Later, in 1996, while she was still the prime minister, her other brother Murtaza, was slain in a police encounter (allegedly masterminded by spy agencies working to destabilise her government). Finally, in October 1996 her much trusted and hand picked President, Farooq Leghari, deposed her unceremoniously, handing over the reigns of power, through a controversial and allegedly rigged election, to her sworn foe, Nawaz Sharif.

Nawaz unleashed a merciless persecution of her family and her Pakistan People's Party, forcing her into exile and imprisoning her husband Asif Zardari. It is noteworthy to add here that the unsparing wheel of fate soon dealt the same card to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. In 1999, the present government toppled his government and later forced him to exile in Saudi Arabia. The two senior judges handling Benazir's file resigned in disgrace, as recordings of their conversations made national headlines.

Many of her detractors would point out that Benazir's regimes were mired with inefficiency, nepotism and feudalistic nuances. Her finance managers mismanaged the economy and one of her Federal Finance Advisors had to resign when multilateral agencies complained of Pakistan fudging its books. While in government she made little effort to win allies in the military and the judiciary and antagonised political friends often on issues that were avoidable. In a complex country with weak institutional traditions, she exhibited little or no understanding of her 'limits of power' and paid a huge personal and political price in the process.

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Musharraf are perceived as pro-West liberals who hated Nawaz Sharif with a passion (albeit for different reasons), one would have imagined Musharraf to have cozied up to her as a natural ally. However, with the military on his side, the General followed a different course.

His road to absolutism was helped by geo-political changes in a post 9/11 world and Benazir was left out in political lurch. Sensing her as a challenger to his 'liberal' credentials in the west, he needed a bargaining chip for her arm-twisting. He decided to keep her husband languishing in jail for another four years. Asif was finally released and now lives in Dubai with his family. Ironically, to this day, Benazir's spouse has not been convicted in any of the cases for which he was detained for seven long years.

In the interim, old wounds healed. Political imperatives brought Benazir and Nawaz Sharif together, who, united under ARD (Alliance for Restoration of Democracy), launched their anti-Musharraf struggle from the sidelines. The president, by now the west's trusted ally, had his firm grip on power. A rubber stamp parliament had been put in place and all his actions were judicially validated.

All of this is now history.

The US is mired in Iraq and hapless in Afghanistan. Taliban have since regrouped in Pakistani Tribal areas. Mosques in the Federal Capital Islamabad have become more radicalised than ever. Suicidal terror attacks targeting Pakistan's civilian and military

assets are the norm. The Bush administration is hinting at bombing hostile targets on Pakistani soil and the government has alienated the Supreme Court after unsuccessfully trying to sack the Chief Justice. There seems to be an emerging consensus both within and outside of Pakistan that the president may not be the panacea for the region's ills and that in the absence of a 'real' democracy the nuclear Islamic state may soon implode.

With political tsunamis crisscrossing Pakistan, its beleaguered leader recently made his sojourn to Abu Dhabi accompanied by his trusted aide. The agenda of the now not-so-secret meeting was to seek Benazir's help to stabilise this regime's rocking boat.

"This doesn't seem to be happening soon for obvious reasons," said a political commentator. "He needs her help to gain street legitimacy and another term as a president in uniform. This will be political hara-kiri for Benazir. It's like voting for a 'martial law'. Her popularity graph will take a nose dive and weaken her place at the bargaining table."

"Pakistan has become pretty much ungovernable and all players including Benazir have limited options," conceded a former federal minister, now out of favour in Benazir's books.

It is widely believed that Benazir made a counter offer to the president that he rejected out right. In a nutshell, he's acceptable to her in a reduced role as the president without the uniform. She also wants him to allow her and rival-turned-ally, Nawaz Sharif, to return and participate in the forthcoming elections. In order to keep the two former prime ministers out of any race in the future, Musharraf had enacted a law that bars them from running for the prime minister's office. Benazir wants this law repealed.

Given his present ratings in Pakistan, the General under-

stands the pitfalls if the elections are held in a fair and transparent manner. His PML (Q) is not likely to return as the majority party. This would mean an independent parliament, powerful enough to strip him of his powers and the uniform.

"Imposition of emergency is an option", warned Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain in a recent statement. Implying that if the president can't have it his way he has the power to dismantle the entire system. It was a blatant warning to all the players that they need to accommodate the general or lose the right to play.

To Sheikh Rasheed "Politics in Pakistan has entered its final round." As the game gets dangerous and the stakes rise, options for all stakeholders become increasingly stark. Unless there is a strong emerging consensus about the country's ideological future it would be impossible for its polity to settle into a governable groove. It is yet to be seen, if in the future, Pakistan will be a theocracy led by religious parties or a modern democracy guided by liberal, centrist political forces.

The president, judiciary, religious extremists, secular parties led by Nawaz Sharif and Benazir, neighbours Afghanistan, India, Iran and China and the big guy, America, are all overcrowding the arena with high stakes. For now, Minister Rasheed's prediction of the game reaching its 'final stage' seems overly simplistic as it is yet to be seen how alignments will shift and new power centres will emerge to shape the destiny of this South Asian Islamic state.

The road to recovery, peace and institutional stability is always an uphill journey. Any new set up in Pakistan will have to be resilient enough to negotiate some of the deadliest political mine fields. With institutions weakened by decades of directionless quasi democracies, the post Musharraf view of Pakistan seems at best murky.